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ABSTRACT

Since recent rises in standardized test scores have once again raised the possibility of cheating, there are a number of things which a school district should do to minimize the problem. These involve: (1) informing staff, students, and parents about appropriate and inappropriate test-taking and test-improvement skills; (2) providing staff and student training sessions; (3) reporting test data in a way which will minimize erroneous or harmful inferences; and (4) maintaining a plan to minimize possible testing compromise. (GDC)

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CHEATING - WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

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CHEATING - WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT IT?

Evidences of rising standardized test scores coupled to a renewed emphasis on educational excellence have once again brought testing practices into question. Some of these questions have been focused on the possibility that score changes have possibly been brought about by cheating. While neither the literature nor practical experience has produced evidences of other than sporadic incidents, the possibility that widespread cheating might occur and that test-score patterns might be altered can always be raised as a potential problem. Despite evidences to the contrary, this possibility always exists and could stem from either intentional or unintentional practices. If these practices did occur, they might come from parents, teachers, or students.

Although the monitoring of testing practices outside of the classroom is not easily accomplished, there are a number of things which a school district can do to minimize the problem. These involve informing staff, students, and parents about appropriate and inappropriate test-taking and test-improvement skills, staff and student training sessions, reporting test data in a way which will minimize erroneous or harmful inferences, and maintaining a plan to minimize possible testing compromise. Recommendations regarding these activities and others which can be accomplished at the professional, State, and publisher level are considered.

CHEATING - WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

Concern about the quality of American education seems to occur in cycles. While changes in the level of concern may be brought about by societal or economic pressures, they often come to the public's attention by route of the media. One or more well-publicized reports (e.g., Gardiner, 1961 or the Phi Delta Kappa Annual Gallup Poll) often lead to at least some school-reform activity, which may be followed in turn by another spate of general indifference. We seem to be on the upswing of one of these cycles.

About 24 years ago, John Gardiner (1961) reported that the United States had a unique opportunity to improve education given the unprecedented backing which was being provided by the politicians, and more recent reports--about 30 at last count--have concluded that education is still lacking today. Currently, about 300 tasks forces have been appointed at national, state, and local levels, and most are still seeking the holy grail of excellence (Cross, 1984). While the definition of excellence is probably in the eye of the beholder, at least one generally-accepted indicator is the belief(!) that when schools improve, test scores get better. And as the media has reported, scores are going up.

Despite the usual doom-seekers, schools seem to be getting better. The 16th Annual Gallup Poll (Gallup, 1984), reported that "Americans are more favorably disposed towards the public schools than in any time during the last decade." Yet despite this growing support, and added evidences of school improvement, reports of rising test scores are often received with skepticism rather than with joy. This skepticism is particularly evident in an urban setting where erst-while critics refuse to believe that the school system can and is doing something right.

Most of the skepticism about test-score improvements seems to come from the media. The American School Board Journal, in its August 1984 issue, published a banner article entitled, "Are Your Standardized Test Scores Looking Too Rosy?" (Savage, 1984). While the article raised questions about city rising test-score claims, it presented no evidences that the schools were cheating on tests or that increased scores were due to other than legitimate instructional efforts. Even so, a subtitle, "Are schools cheating?" continued to raise the spectre of doubt. This is only one instance, albeit a well-publicized one, in which apparently legitimate test practices were being brought into question, and on the basis of speculation rather than fact.

Where does this leave us? In the first instance, the title of this paper is a misnomer; neither the literature nor practical experience has produced evidences of other than sporadic instances of public-school cheating. Even Savage (1984), and despite his avowed pessimism, allowed that in all probability, test-score increases were not caused by cheating nor by coaching students on the items which appeared on the test.

In the public mind, however, there is always a fear of cheating. Should cheating increase markedly, it might come about from intentional or unintentional activities engaged in by well-meaning parents, teachers, or students. And while the blame for any escalation in cheating would have to be shared by parties ranging from the politicians who use test scores to assess teacher and classroom effectiveness to the parents who view a test score as the only real indicator of student success, the responsibility for inappropriate testing practices and for instituting corrective action will in all probability fall on the shoulders of the local test director. Despite a limited ability to control testing activities which occur outside of the classroom, once again the schools would be saddled with the shame. While there is little chance that the powers that be will mandate national rationality in testing, there are some preventative steps which can be taken. And while these should represent a shared solution, in all probability, the schools will have to take the lead. Here, five general preventative areas are suggested; these are necessarily interrelated.

1. All testing is serious business. This point should receive a command emphasis at all levels from the Board of Education and the superintendency on down. Policies and practices which attend to the importance of testing must be carefully developed and monitored, and appropriate corrective actions should be instituted when necessary. Among other areas, the district must be able to assure its publics that testing is taking place under optimal conditions, that test materials are distributed, used, and safeguarded, and that the communication of test information to the various publics is open and equitable. In our community, there is an embargo on the purchase of the city-wide achievement tests and only two district signatures are authorized. In some communities, this may not be practical, or even legal. While this action improves the appearance of testing legitimacy, it must be pointed out that even with an embargo, tests can usually be obtained from the publisher if the request is made on school stationary, and at the local university. Unfortunately, neither The Joint Technical Standards (1984), nor the publishers have dealt with this particular problem. Standard 15.13 simply says that the test

user should protect the security of test materials, and tends to ignore the fact that these same tests are generally available to the public. While there may be a number of long-term solutions to this problem, a preventative strategy must be initiated at once; it must be one which says that testing is important, that test scores impact upon decisions, and that improper testing can lead to adverse sociatial and political results.

2. Testing is a life skill for students. As such, test-taking skills must, and should, be taught in the classroom. While a number of teaching materials are on the market, most notably those produced by the various test publishers, the approach to test taking should be a generic one; it should not focus on any particular test, but on testing as a whole. Preferably, testing skills should be taught as a part of the overall curriculum. As one example, the same skills which are needed to read for comprehension and to solve problems are used in testing, although here it may be necessary for the teacher to make the link.

And, since the public may not understand the distinction between coaching for a test and teaching testing skills, again appropriate procedures must be established to ensure that ethical teaching practices are in place. While some teachers may still continue to criticize standardized testing (e.g. Ward), the knowledge that a lack of test-taking skills is going to penalize youngsters is usually enough to tip the scales in favor of testing instruction. Even so, the dos and don'ts of testing (Iverson, 1985) should be spelled out carefully and monitored as well.

3. Teachers should be trained in classroom testing. While Sax (1980) and other text-book authors have talked about the ethics of testing, and the technical issues involved in selecting, constructing and using tests, little attention has been given paid to the practical aspects of classroom testing. Neither does the traditional tests and measurements course fill the bill; it too is technical rather than practical in nature. For example, tests and measurements courses do not cover such often overlooked issues such as student seating (left- and right-handed chairs, space, lighting, etc.), (stretching--we tell youngsters to move their heads and bodies up and down, but definitely not sideways), answering questions (holding up pencil reduces questions and certainly saves time), and cleaning up answer sheets ("pencil points up and down" instruction). While test and measurements courses could be restructured, with teachers take a practical course and potential administrators, counselors and the like instructed in the traditional methodologies, school districts must fill the present training gap.

Unfortunately, school-based training may not be a practical solution. Contractual constraints and other obligations limit the training time which is available and, while it is usually possible to train a school test coordinator, getting the entire staff together is often an impossible task. While Hartford has developed a three-segment training program which covers the test instruments which are used in the city, the use and misuse of resultant test data, and how to improve test-taking skills, the dropout rate has been a high one. There just has not been enough available time. An alternative solution then, is to develop a testing handbook.

4. School people need a handbook. A clear and concise basic English handbook should be developed which meets a district's testing needs. This handbook should address the importance of testing; how to instruct, administer and proctor test results; interpretation (we call it, "what my mother never taught me about testing") of test results; and the logistical requirements for test security, receipt, turn in, etc. Hopefully, it should include local forms and checklists and should serve as a how-to-do-it reference. While the importance of this handbook is recognized, we have not been able to produce one as yet; Dallas and Austin, Texas, and perhaps Montgomery County, Maryland appear to be far ahead of us in this regard.

5. An ongoing dialogue with the public is needed. Because of the compelling importance and limitations of test scores, communications are particularly important. There should be a well-developed plan for disseminating and interpreting test information which begins at the central-office and involves all levels of staff. The teachers must be an important part of this plan since many parents have neither the time nor the interest to read technical information. In consequence, test information is more easily communicated orally, on a one-to-one basis, and here the teacher is often the most appropriate person for this task. How to communicate this test information should be covered in staff training and in the testing handbook. After all, many teachers received their testing courses some time ago, and without constant use, whatever they learned could easily have been forgotten.

One final note. Despite any evidence or indicators that cheating might be on the upswing, it is better to be safe than sorry. This is why a preventative plan is needed; not because something is happening, but just in case it does!

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